

Dear Dan Ruben,

Thanks to the financial assistance of my law school and Equal Justice America, I had the incredible opportunity of working as part of the Immigrant Legal Defense (ILD) team at the National Immigrant Justice Center (NIJC). NIJC provides immigration services to low income immigrants, and ILD serves non-detained clients in family petitions, visas for victims of trafficking (T visas) or victims of crime (U visa), legal permanent residency applications, deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA), and waivers for people who have to leave families to consular process in their home countries and in doing so would trigger permanent bars to re-entry into the United States (PUP waivers), just to name a few of the areas of practice. I was part of a team of one supervising attorney and two paralegals. My work included scheduling and meeting with clients during intake and follow ups, prepping their cases, translating documents, making FOIA inquiries, doing legal research, strategizing with attorneys, and following up with clients for any information or paperwork they're missing. I was also given the opportunity to attend oral arguments at the 7th circuit and see some great (and some not so great) oral advocacy. Immigration court is so backlogged and underfunded (on top of the fact that one judge is retiring) that cases were being scheduled on place-holder dates in 2019. I was not able to represent a client in court given the backlog, but I did draft a motion to the court and a prosecutorial discretion request to the Office of the Chief Counsel. The first had a successful outcome for our client, while the second is still pending.

What I liked about my work was the variety, not just in the many different kinds of cases NIJC represents, but that each one comes with its own legal and personal challenges. Given NIJC's extensive U visa program, coupled with the harrowing journeys many have taken to get here, most of the clients have had extremely difficult lives. Knowing how to provide services in a trauma-informed manner is crucial. I also had to be extremely organized to limit the number of times my clients came into the office; for many, they have to risk their jobs to take a day off to come to the office or spend money they can't afford on gas, downtown parking, or CTA fare. Immigration applications also involve an incredible amount of paperwork and information, so I made sure to talk to my clients in advance about what documents they needed to bring, who to call or where to go to get them, and what these papers look like. Many clients didn't speak English and some were illiterate, so obtaining all this documentation from different government entities, which is difficult to begin with, posed an even greater challenge.

The incredible variety of clients I met and worked with meant I learned an unbelievable amount about immigration law and different procedures. I learned more practical, real-world knowledge in 10 weeks than in two years of law school. I also learned that clients view you not just as their immigration attorney, but as a general source of guidance, so the work involves being an attorney and social worker in one. One of my T visa clients told me during our meeting that she believed she was being followed by her trafficker. I did some Googling and found out

her trafficker had been paroled out and (somewhat serendipitously) that the description of the car matched the car she used to drive. I called her social worker immediately for her to develop a safety plan with her. Luckily, we received confirmation that her trafficker had been deported, which provided my client some very much-needed peace of mind. My client also needed family law services back in her home country so her children could obtain passports to come to the US. This required being in touch with attorneys in her home country to get them the paperwork and translations they needed.

My most memorable case was a prosecutorial discretion request for a client who was facing deportation. He and his wife had been placed in deportation proceedings during a checkpoint in Texas. His wife met the required number of years of physical presence in the U.S. to qualify for cancellation of removal, but my client was two years short. He had no criminal record, only traffic related run-ins with the law, and he was the father to four U.S. citizen children—one who had extensive medical issues. His wife likewise suffered from medical problems, and it was clear that without my client's emotional, physical, and emotional support, this family would not be able to support itself without him. While drafting his affidavit, I asked my client why he wanted to stay in the United States. He responded that everything he did was for his children, so that they could keep studying, get good jobs, and ensure that, unlike him, when people shook their hands, they didn't feel blisters. His story really embodied for me why I went to law school and why I'm pursuing immigration law. Being a lawyer in public interest gives me the ability to help people who suffer from the injustice of a flawed government system. My client's deportation would serve no purpose aside from completely tearing apart a happy family. If I am able to help prevent that in any way, I can't turn away from that opportunity.

I went to work and left each day happily knowing that I made the right choice in going to law school, despite however many times I might've doubted it while studying for finals or getting through 1L. I still think about the clients, including one who was surprising her valedictorian daughter with her green card at her graduation. That hope for a better future is why my family and I came to this country, why I went to law school, and why I am committed to continuing my work in public interest. I am incredibly grateful to EJA for the opportunity, and I'm eagerly awaiting years of rewarding legal work.

Again, many thanks,

Naiara Testai
University of Chicago, J.D. Candidate '17